

RPG Reload File 002 – 'Chrono Trigger'

[August 21, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome back to **RPG Reload**, the regular weekly feature where we jump into the time machines in our minds and take another look at an iOS RPG from days past. All types of RPGs are welcome here, and just to make sure things don't get tilted entirely towards my tastes, each month I'll be playing and writing about a game chosen by you. Right now, it's looking very much like *The Quest Gold* ([\\$7.99](#)) will be the topic of **RPG Reload 004**, but if you have a different idea, please make your voice heard in the comments below. I also encourage you to share your thoughts on the topic game in the comments, and if you have some spare gaming time, fire it up and play along in the [RPG Reload Club](#) thread in our forums.

Okay, so maybe last week's hint was a little bit too easy. If anything, that likely speaks to the fame of the subject of this week's installment, *Chrono Trigger* ([\\$9.99](#)). Last week, we kicked things off [with a look at](#) Square Enix's *Chaos Rings* ([\\$6.99](#)), and a commenter expressed concern that this feature might end up being completely dominated by their games. I want to assure you that I'm going to do my best to spread them out in the future. Unless, of course, you guys vote differently, but then it's on you. I have a good reason for wanting to cover *Chrono Trigger* this week, because August 22nd, 2014 just happens to be the 19th anniversary of its first release in the United States. That means *Chrono Trigger* can legally drink alcohol in Toronto! It's a perfectly good excuse to replay one of the greatest JRPGs ever.



I can't exactly remember when I first heard about *Chrono Trigger*, but I do remember I was coming down from the high of playing *Final Fantasy 6* ([\\$14.99](#)), and like many JRPG fans of that era, I was going through one heck of an anime phase. I think it was just a single screenshot in a magazine, perhaps of Crono destroying the Dragon Tank on his way out of prison, but the style was clearly *Dragon Ball*/*Dragon Quest* artist Akira Toriyama. Reading the short blurb of text underneath, I saw that this was a new project hatched from a genuine dream team: *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi and *Dragon Quest* creator Yuji Horii. Now, these days, that might not seem so weird, but back then, *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* were heated rivals. Yet somehow, these two defining directors were working together, an almost impossibly exciting concept.

After a long wait and tireless scanning of any and all magazine coverage, I finally got my hands on a copy just as summer vacation of 1995 was coming to a close. To date, it's the most money I've ever spent on a game, coming up to a cool \$132 Canadian dollars. It was worth every cent. I think I ripped through the game in just a few days, after which I took advantage of the cool New Game+ feature to run through it again and again, looking for more

endings. At first, I was upset at how much shorter it was than *Final Fantasy* 6, but the sheer pace of the game won me over quickly. Even now, I think that is the game's biggest strength. RPGs sometimes have a tendency to drag events out, perhaps trying to achieve a longer runtime to give the whole thing a more epic feel. *Chrono Trigger*, on the other hand, has little interest in wasting your time. It's a remarkably lean affair compared to its contemporaries, feeling very much like a manic Saturday morning cartoon. It somehow manages that trick without sacrificing an epic feel.



The snappy pace comes through in so many ways. You don't shift to another screen to battle enemies, you pull out your weapons and start duking it out right there on the map. Speaking of maps, the overworld opts for a reduced scale with no encounters, making traveling between event locations hassle-free and brief. With fully-animated enemies shuffling around during fights, the Active Time Battle system borrowed from *Final Fantasy* feels more kinetic than ever. The game is also quite linear for most of its run, though it does this in a very sly fashion by using the time portals as a narrative excuse. When it finally does open up, you're only a quick hop away from the end whenever you decide to make a go of it. All throughout the game, it keeps

the set pieces rolling, one-upping each one with the next like a ridiculous caricature of a football dogpile. You reach the end, that final crescendo, save the world and time itself, and no sooner do the credits finish rolling than the game challenges you to do it again. Faster, this time.

Yet for all it does to maintain its breakneck pace, *Chrono Trigger* also allows itself to slow down at point. After a dynamite opening capping off with a thrilling prison escape through time, you find yourself in the distant future, and suddenly, the whole tone of the game changes. The thrilling, high-energy, rhythm-heavy music heard up to this point gives way to a somber, unsettling, ambient piece. The bright crayon colors are replaced with browns and grays. The air is full of dust, and the people you meet are hunched over and in a bad state. Welcome to the future, where you can restore your HP and MP anytime you like, but you'll still be hungry. It's a gutsy move to grind your story's momentum to such a dramatic halt. It's equally risky to shift plot gears in such a way that most of the things you saw as problems up to this point are almost entirely inconsequential. I hope you're done playing around, the game seems to urge, because now you've got serious work to do.



It holds on this moment just long enough to drive the consequences of failure into your head. Before long, it gets back into things like motorcycle cyborgs and dinosaur jump-kicking, but the image remains, perhaps partly owing to its status as a rare slow-paced downer in an otherwise peppy game. Not many games allow you to see the outcome of failure and still let you fix things, but *Chrono Trigger's* time travel plot is perfectly setup to handle this situation, making the eventual knockdown battle against Lavos feel that much more meaningful. There are a few other areas in the game that ask you to slow down, such as the eerie trek through Magus's stronghold and the fairly lengthy stay in the rotten-cored Kingdom of Zeal. I'm not sure whether it's by design or happy accident that most of these areas instill a sense of dread in the player. It's implied that time is moving, and if you're not moving with it, you're as good as gone.

This could all get incredibly heavy if it weren't for the fact that *Chrono Trigger* uses comic relief almost perfectly. The game is not above using a stupid gag as a way to break tension, and there are also plenty of little moments of oddness that, while not necessarily funny, might make you do a double-take. It's awesome, funny, weird, sad, thought-provoking, and cheerful in just the right measures. I think it speaks strongly to the variety of talent adding their input into the game's scenario. This very easily could have ended up as a "too many cooks" situation, but instead we got one of the most optimistic possible outcomes. It's unfortunate that this particular combination of talent will likely go down in history as a one-off.



The story is just one part of the excellent whole, though. *Chrono Trigger* also has one of the more interesting takes on the Active Time Battle combat system, with every character having shared combo attacks they can activate with others. You have to consider whether it's better for your overall strategy to have a speedy character wait for a slower one to join them for a technique, or if you should just have them take their turns as they come. There are also quite a few puzzle bosses where you need to attack a certain part before going after others. The combo techniques give an added weight to your party selections, making up for a relative lack of individual customization. The visible enemies are another interesting deviation that paid off. Sure, most of them weren't really avoidable, but it gave the player the power to dictate when a battle would happen.

I think that gets at another thing that makes *Chrono Trigger* stand out. The game wasn't afraid to buck the tropes of the genre. You want to go try to fight the end boss 15 minutes into the game? Go for it. You can even win, if you're strong enough. One of my favorite instances of this is when, late in the game, an enemy imprisons you, taking away your weapons and gear. You're meant to sneak your way through this section until you can recover

your stuff. On the other hand, if you have Ayla in your party, things go a little differently. Ayla fights with her fists, so she's just as capable of taking out enemies as ever, circumventing the design of this area. It would have been all too easy for the developers to just handwave the logic gap, but they didn't. I think that goes a long way towards showing where their mindset was.



Of course, one of the big pitfalls when modern gamers go back to classic games is the presentation. I grew up with the medium, so I can easily slide back into classic stuff, but that's not the case for everyone. Perhaps due to its relatively late release in the 16-bit cycle, *Chrono Trigger* is a visual and audio dynamo that still holds up well to this day. This was the first game that Yasunori Mitsuda composed the soundtrack for, and he worked himself literally into sickness creating it. After Mitsuda was hospitalized with stomach ulcers, *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu came in and finished the last few tracks the game needed. It's not Mitsuda's best work, but it might be his most memorable, and when you consider that this was his first attempt, it's absolutely incredible how it all came out. The visuals similarly rise to the challenge, with some of the most expressive renditions of Akira Toriyama's artwork in a game to that point, a huge variety of locales,

impressive hand-drawn lighting effects, and an excellent use of the Super Nintendo's rich color palette. Nearly 20 years later, most sprite-based games don't look as good.

Chrono Trigger is one of the true greats of the genre. It's not hard to see why many people still feel it's the best JRPG ever made. I don't precisely agree with that sentiment, but it's definitely up there. Unfortunately, in spite of its success both critically and financially, it ended up with a bad future. There were a few *Chrono*-related releases on the Japan-only Satellaview, but they essentially consisted a couple of mini-games and a visual novel that has been struck from canon. There was a port of *Chrono Trigger* to the PlayStation riddled with loading times and slowdown. Some cut scenes were added to help set up the next project, 1999's *Chrono Cross*. It was a very divisive game, to say the least. *Chrono Trigger* also received an extended port to the Nintendo DS, with the speed of the original and the extra features of the PlayStation version, along with a new translation and some new content tied directly to *Chrono Cross*.



It's this version that appears to be the basis of the iOS port, released in

December of 2011. The nicest thing I can say about this version is that it's not as bad as the PlayStation version and it runs pretty well when a new iOS update doesn't break it. First of all, it's an iPhone/iPod Touch app as opposed to a Universal one. It uses a decorative border on 4-inch screens instead of filling to the edges, and the graphics have a filter applied that looks like someone smeared lotion on the original game. The controls have been reworked, and while mini-games come out surprisingly fine, basic combat is a bit hard to work with due to a few bad choices with the UI design. Bafflingly, while Square Enix cut the animated videos from the PSX/DS versions presumably for size reasons, they opted to encode the music in a very high quality format, leading to an install size well beyond what *Chrono Trigger* should ever require.

Still, diving into the port for a proper playthrough, the original game's high quality cannot be denied. The positive side of the giant filesize is that the music sounds terrific, and your eyes kind of adjust to the filter after a short while. There's no slowdown or loading times, and it has most of the extra content from the DS version, if you happen to want to subject yourself to that experience. The sometimes-fussy controls can be an irritant, particularly during action sequences where you have to chase something or when fighting a boss that punishes you for hitting the wrong target, but generally, as long as you're okay with virtual sticks, you'll be fine. I found myself slipping into the game more easily than I anticipated, and had a wonderful time experiencing the adventures of Crono and friends again. I think I'll be sticking to the DS version for future replays, however, unless Square Enix does one heck of an overhaul on this app. I'm not going to hold my breath on that, though.



If you're exclusively gaming on an iPhone or iPod Touch, I'll hesitantly recommend this as an RPG reload simply due to the quality of the original. Otherwise, there are at least two better ways to experience the game, one of which is conveniently portable. I want to know what you think, though, so please leave your comments below. You could talk about your memories of the original, what you think of this version, stories about Magus-shaped potato chips you found in your bag of Lay's, or just cast a vote for what you want to see me play in the article after next. Don't forget to pop into the [RPG Reload Club](#) thread on our forums and join the fun! There will be (no) punch and pie served. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Pack your graph paper and a lyre.*